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Repatriated Art
by S. Ray Granade
7/3/2016

For over half a century, the watercolor painting had hung where Mother could see it daily. The unsigned piece was interestingly framed behind glass and large bamboo, bamboo such as the tall stalks that grew just west of the “new” pastorium on McMillan Street’s driveway and lot line. It featured a Mexican cathedral, but with an oblique rather than a straight-on vantage-point and the structure in middle- rather than foreground. The cathedral brooded rather than towered over the village stretching suggestively toward the foreground, which featured a blank wall, tree that appeared to be cypress, and windowless casa with tiled roof. The foreground itself was an expanse of street and intersection, with laden burro awaiting the indistinct male figure behind it while an equally laden female figure trudged the right-angle toward the cathedral. All in all, a nice but not spectacular painting.

What made the painting special to Mother and me was less the subject matter than the artist. Virginia Gailey had come with her Presbyterian husband to occupy the small manse next to the equally small church in the small South-Alabama county-seat town in which I grew up. Virginia and James had appeared soon after my parents had moved into the ramshackle white wooden Baptist pastorium a half-block away. The Evergreen Baptist Church, which my father pastored, occupied about half the east side of Park Street’s block between East Front (and the railroad and viaduct) and Cemetery Avenue. The Presbyterian Church stood on the southwest corner of Park and Cemetery, perched on the hilltop just before the land sloped down east on Cemetery and south on Park.

Virginia was an artist by training, temperament, and experience. Mother was a bohemian soul in the body of a Baptist preacher’s wife. She had the social training and consciousness of the only daughter of a woman born into a family of much status and little money in a small rural setting. She lacked debutante training but absorbed her mother’s social understandings enough to recognize all the niceties. Both of the young women were city-folks in a rural setting and they shared a whole range of sensibilities. Several other women of about the same age made up the core of the Study Club, and they were each other’s intellectual salvation in 1950s small-town Alabama. Although I never heard her voice the sentiment, I knew that Mother considered Virginia “an interesting person,” which was Mother’s highest accolade. By that she would have meant that Virginia talked about “things that mattered” rather than falling into the vocal rut of talking only, as a local put it, “about who done what and who they done it with.” Virginia and Mother were “in sync” and discussed the arts and related events and maintained their friendship as long as they lived. Soon separated by Virginia’s return to Atlanta, they visited frequently and always picked up conversations as though there had been no interruption of time, much less space.

I was, and remained, my parents’ only child; Virginia and James were childless. I enjoyed, or suffered, evidences of both women’s maternal instincts, and was equally at home in either place. As could only be expected from the young focus of the instincts of two women interested in art, I supplemented my sports (baseball and field and stream) interests with musical and visual art ones and shared their literary devotion. In the course of the Gailey’s brief Evergreen tenure, Virginia provided some rudimentary lessons and access to a few art supplies. And while Mother applauded my products, Virginia praised them lavishly. Although the proportions remain unclear to me even at this remove, I’m sure that some of Virginia’s praise sprang from her art education instincts, some from her encouragement of her dear friend’s son, and some from appreciation of whatever meager talent I may have exhibited. The most lavish of her praise emerged the day she proposed to swap me one of her paintings for one of my own. Even as a young child, I recognized the imbalance of the exchange. But she had made me an offer I could not refuse.

James may well have framed the watercolor; he framed their high school graduation gift to me (a reproduction of Paul Klee’s “Sinbad the Sailor”). Mother may have had it framed in Montgomery. I

don't remember it gracing the walls of the Park Street parsonage, from which we moved when I was in the third grade. But it always hung above the den fireplace in "the new parsonage" while I ventured through public school, then college, and finally graduate school. The Klee became the first piece of art we hung when Ronnie and I married, but my first piece of art, the watercolor cathedral, remained on Mother's walls. The cathedral had appeared in one of my public school history books—full-face frontal view—and I recognized it immediately. So over the years it came to mean more to me on a variety of levels. But while Mother was careful to offer me various furnishing items as we went from apartment to apartment and then to our own house, she never mentioned giving up my painting. For my part, I recognized why it meant so much to her. It hung in the den of the house they finally purchased in Montgomery—the only home she and Daddy ever owned. And when she moved to assisted living it went above the sofa of her room. Though large, it followed her from assisted living in Wesley Gardens to John Knox Manor and her succession of rooms there even as the room size dwindled.

I was complicit in Mother's retention of my painting for about sixty years. I enjoyed it when we visited twice annually once we moved to Arkansas, and I knew that eventually, in the natural order of things, I would regain it, would have it as my own. Most importantly, I recognized that Mother needed that tangible link with her dear, dear friend. Having it on her wall was in a way having Virginia constantly in the house.

Mother collected some very nice art once they moved to Montgomery in 1973. Some of it we brought away when they broke up housekeeping in 2005. The rest we brought out in the final disposition of things almost a year after her death. Three times we shuffled art around in our home, accommodating original pieces that we gained from her dwindling collection. A few she sent to Misty's house, to the granddaughter-in-law who reminded her so much of Virginia. And I love each and every piece that we inherited. But when I finally hung, on the wall of my own home, the painting that so long ago I traded for one of mine.... Well, I finally understood viscerally what I'd read about numerous times before. Looking at the cathedral on my own wall helped me realize what those whose family's art was stolen in World War II must have felt when it was, at long last, returned to them.